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1. Sanchi Stupa vs. Shwedagon Pagoda

Because I didn't draw the plans of Sanchi Stupa (of India) myself, I will have to refer you to them by links:

<https://www.history.upenn.edu/coursepages/hist086/material/sanchi.htm>

<http://www.clearias.com/post-mauryan-art-architecture/>

<http://www2.oberlin.edu/images/1042/02.JPG>

<https://www.slideshare.net/hamzaaaaah/buddhist-architecture-stupa-final>

Sanchi Stupa, the Indian Ideal

In the Indian ancient Buddhist architecture there are five main parts of an ancient pagoda:

Sanskrit	Burmese	Burmese pron.	Exact English translation	Official English translation	Notes
<i>Medhi</i>	မိန္ဒ	[Phanat]	"Shoe"	Circular platform	The platform that surrounds all of the pagoda with its staircases.
<i>Anda</i> ("Egg")	အမိုးခံ	[Amoe-Khone]	"Roof-Table"	Dome	The largest round part of the pagoda, smooth and very obvious
<i>Harmikā</i>	သေတ္တာ	[Thet-Tar]	"Box"	Pedestal surrounded by a square railing	This is in the top part of the pagoda
<i>Yasti</i> (<i>Yashti</i>)	ထီးရှိုး	[Hti-Yoe]	"Parasol-Pole"	Pole of the Parasol	Arises from anda and harmika and hosts a series of parasols
<i>Chatravali</i> / <i>Chatra</i> (<i>Chhatravali</i>)	ထီးချက်(များ)	[Hti-Ywet (Myar)]	"Parasol-Leave(s)"	Triple Parasol	At the very top of the pagoda structure

More features of Sanchi Stupa are:

Sanskrit	English	Notes
<i>Sopāna</i>	Stairway	The two stairways that lead upward toward the pagoda
<i>Pradakṣiṇā Patha</i> (<i>Pradakshina Patha</i>)	Circumambulatory path	The enclosed area around the pagoda where people can walk and circumambulate the pagoda
<i>Torāṇa</i>	Gateway	The portal(s) to the pagoda area
<i>Vedikā</i>	Railing around the pagoda	This railing is constructed on the first floor of the pagoda, at the border of the <i>Pradakṣiṇā Patha</i>

Now the main question will be how these characteristics are (or are not) represented in the Burmese pagodas.

If we take Shwedagon as the paradigm for most Burmese pagodas, then it should suffice to analyze them in Shwedagon Pagoda.

Sanchi Stupa vs. Shwedagon Pagoda

Out of the main five characteristics, Shwedagon pagoda is missing only the *Harmikā*, i.e. "the pedestal surrounded by a square railing." This pedestal would be a tiny platform right on top of the *Anda*, the dome. When we look at Shwedagon Pagoda, we can see that the dome continues tapering and tapering, without any "pedestal" or "square railing". *Medhi*, the circular platform is almost continuously carrying a number of people, and if we really take that platform for *medhi*, then we can recognize the "hidden" circular platform (which is little bit above the main platform, accessible by a single police-guarded stairway) as the *Pradakṣinā Patha* (circumambulatory path) of the additional features. However, only Burmese men with special permit can access that *Pradakṣinā Patha*. If we say that the large public platform is the *Pradakṣinā Patha*, then we might have difficulties when searching *Medhi*, the circular platform around the large Shwedagon Pagoda with its great stairways (there is no such "platform" around the great stairways). The parasol with its pole (*Chatravalī* with its *Yaṣṭi*) at the top of the pagoda are obvious even when looking from the ground.

These four characteristics, i.e. *Pradakṣinā* (and sometimes *Medhi*), *Anda*, *Yaṣṭi*, and *Chatravalī* are to be seen in most of Burmese pagodas throughout Myanmar.

As for the additional features, there *Sopāna* (stairway) is commonly seen in many pagodas, and sometimes it is made mindbogglingly long. *Torāṇa*, the gateway, is particularly common but sometimes little bit further than the pagoda itself. In Myanmar many pagodas are built as a part of a monastery, and gateways are then built for the monastery as a whole, not only for the pagoda. There are however pagodas within monasteries which have their own gateway. Finally, *Vedikā* (the railing) is obviously employed around the *Pradakṣinā Patha* if that is above the ground. The railing then protects the people from falling down from that circumambulatory platform. Shwedagon Pagoda doesn't have *Vedikā* in the "hidden" platform, however there is a good *Vedikā* around the public circumambulatory platform.

On the other hand, Shwedagon Pagoda has a whole lot of features which are not found in Sanchi Stupa. Unlike in Sanchi Stupa, the different geometric and picturesque shapes of the tapering Shwedagon Pagoda remind the visitor of the Path to Enlightenment. First, decreasing one's conceit by descending from the Dagun-Daing, one starts gradually from the base and finalizes the Path by attaining the highest Enlightenment at the "Noble Bird's Rest", the very top, from which there is the "escape" from suffering, passing into *Parinibbāna*.

2. A Few Bits from A Great Sayadaw (notes from Sun Lun Sayadaw's Biography)

Sunlun Sayadaw was one of the greatest Arahants that ever walked on the surface of Mother Earth. In fact, his existence had a great impact on the Burmese society, and it can serve as an immense inspiration for many people.

Maung Kyaw Din (1877-1952), who later became the famous Sunlun Sayadaw (Pāli name U Kavi) was an ordinary farmer, childless, married. One day an astrologer indicated to Maung Kyaw Din, that he will soon die. Maung Kyaw Din got scared and meditated (on breath, *ānāpānā*) as much as he could. Dedicating to meditation so much time, keeping mindfulness every moment, he became an *Anāgāmī*. His biography tells us exactly when he attained his Paths and Fruitions:¹

¹ Some people may think this is weird that an Enlightened person will remember the day of their Enlightenment attainments. That is because those people are not Enlightened. It is very easy to underestimate an Enlightened person, or to criticize him/her. Unconditional politeness and mutual support are therefore recommended.

1. Attainment of Stream-Entry (*Sotāpanna*) : 1920, 13th waning day of Waso month
2. Attainment of Once-Return (*Sakadāgāmī*) : 1920, 13th waning day of Wagaung month
3. Attainment of Non-Return (*Anāgāmī*) : 1920, 13th waning day of Tawthalin month
4. Attainment of Arahanthood (*Arahant*) : 1920, 13th waning day of the Thadingyut

All happened during the four months of rainy season. Very quick! And therefore many people didn't believe him. (And you might not believe it too.) Because people didn't believe him, many went up to him and tested him, checked him in various ways. The different ways how Sunlun Sayadaw was tested, examined, cross examined, checked, scrutinized, and interrogated by humans and gods (by speech and by action) are in detail described in his biography: "*The detailed biography of The Venerable Sun Lun Gu Kyaung Sayadaw U Kavi of Myingyan*", (at the end of the book we learn that the book was compiled by the monks of Sunlun Sayadaw's monastery), Translated by U Tin U, U Wara, and Daw Aye Aye Mon, Sweson Media Press, Yangon, 2008. You can download it for free here:

<http://www.sunlun-meditation.net/ebooks/BIOENG.pdf>

Below I am sharing with you some words of Sunlun Sayadaw both in Burmese and English. I believe that they may inspire you on your Noble Path.

Sunlun Saydaw's Biography ²	Official English translation ³
The Era of Liberation	
(၅၀) (ရေးလယ်ဆရာတော်) နောက်တဖန် ဦးကရိအား တဘောင်ရွတ်ပြ မေးမြန်းသည်မှာ -	(51) Asking again U Kavi (i.e. Sunlun Sayadaw) to show (his) supernatural knowledge ⁴ , (Ye Lay Sayadaw said) :
"နှစ်ထောင် ကော်ဟိုး ရေးဘောင်ကျိုး တုံးရှု ဝယ်လိုက်၍။	"Now is the period when over two thousand years have passed, it is like the market that is winding up.
ငါးထောင်ကျမှာ ဝိတ်သောစ၊ မရလေ၏မင်း" ဆိုတာကော ဦးကရိရဲ့။	Those wishing (to buy) should rush up for when five thousand years have passed, there would be nothing left (to buy)." So, what about this, U Kavi?
ဆရာတော်ဘုရား ယခု သာသနာတော်နှစ်- နှစ်ထောင်ကော် ရောက်နေပါပြီ ဘုရား။	Venerable Sir, now over two thousand years of the Buddha's Teaching (<i>Sāsana</i>) has gone by.

² "မြင်းခြံမြို့ ကျေးဇူးရင်စွန်းလွန်းရကောင်းဆရာတော်ဘုရာ်ကြီး၏ ထောပွဲနှစ်အကျယ် တရားတော်များ တရားအားထုတ်နှုန်း", Sun Lun Ashin Vinaya, Sun Lun Gu Kyaung, Mayangon Township, Yangon, 1995. There are some spelling "mistakes" not approved by the Myanmar Ministry of Education. I am keeping them to preserve the original writing. Note that this is however not writing of Sunlun Sayadaw. It is composed by his disciple(s) after Sunlun Sayadaw passed away. Some parts of the biography are directly transcribed from recordings on audio-cassettes.

³ "*The detailed biography of The Venerable Sun Lun Gu Kyaung Sayadaw U Kavi of Myingyan*", (at the end of the book we learn that monks of Sunlun Sayadaw's monastery compiled the information together), Translated by U Tin U, U Wara, and Daw Aye Aye Mon, Sweson Media Press, Yangon, 2008; pp.54-55, 66-67, 70. I have slightly edited the translation to maintain precision.

⁴ The word used here – *tabaung yut-pya* (တဘောင်ရွတ်ပြ) is an old saying, rarely used today. *Tabaung* = an (/another) existence, *Yut-pya* = recite (and) show. There are four kinds of an inspired knowledge, all of them are believed to come from gods: 1. told by a young child, 2. told by a mad man, 3. told by a stage trainer, 4. told by a deity. The fourth is obvious, the first three are mediums for the deity. In this case, what is the source of Sunlun Sayadaw's knowledge, that is not exactly sure. In his biography we learn, that he knew what questions will people ask him the next day, so the previous day he already meditated to get the answer. I suppose that in case of meditation questions Sunlun Sayadaw answered based on his experience, and in case of proverbs etc. he asked the deities. Sunlun Sayadaw also remembered his past lives, so it is possible that sometimes he took the information from there.

<p>အဲဒီတော့ ရေးဘောင်ကျိုးနှင့် တူနေပါတယ်၊ ခေတ်ကလဲ ပိမုတို့စော် ရောက်ပြန်ပါပြီသူရား</p>	<p>It is like the time when the market is about to wind up. The time is ripe for (Insight-Development leading to) Liberation (<i>Nibbāna</i>).</p>
<p>အဲဒီကြောင့် ယနာနေတရားများ အားထုတ်ကြပါလျှင် ပိမိတို့ပါရမိရှိသလောက် ပေါက်ရောက်နိုင်ကြောင့်ပါသူရားဟု ဦးကာဝိက ပြန်လည်ဖြေကြား လျှောက်ထားလေ၏။</p>	<p>Therefore, if (one) makes effort in the Dhamma as (they) live now, they may arrive (and) penetrate as far as are (developed) their Perfections, sir," respectfully answered U Kavi.⁵</p>

Merits - Good Deeds	
<p>(၆၀) ဘယ်လို(ကုသိလိ)များ ပြုရပါမလဲ ဆိုလျှင် ပရိတ်တရား နာယူခြင်း၊ ဘုရားကိုးဆူ ပက်လျှော်ခြင်း၊</p>	<p>(60) But how to do it (i.e. to do deeds of good merits)? You can listen to the <i>Parittas</i> or protective stanzas or to a discourse on <i>Dhamma</i>; you can make ceremonial offering to the Nine Buddhas⁶;</p>
<p>သံပုံစေတီ တည်ခြင်း၊ ညောင်တောက်ခြင်း၊ တံတားခင်းခြင်း၊ သံယာတော်များ ဆွမ်းကပ်လျှော်ခြင်း၊</p>	<p>you may build a little shrine on the sandy stretches of river bank;⁷ put a prop (underneath a sagging branch of) the Sacred Banyan tree or make a small bridge (on a public thoroughfare where there are breaches); you can make offering of food to the <i>Sarigha</i>.</p>
<p>အဲသည်လိုကုသိလိကောင်းမှုများကို ပြုလုပ်တော့ ကံကျိုးလျှင် ကံဆယ် ကံပေါက်လျှင့် ကံ့ော်၊ ကံဆင့်တော့ ကံ့မြင့် ဆိုသလိုပေါ့။</p>	<p>When the good deeds are performed like that, then, as is the saying, if (one's) <i>kamma</i> (/water reservoir) is broken, (one) repairs the <i>kamma</i> (/water reservoir) (that) way; if the <i>kamma</i> (/water reservoir) is perforated, (one) patches the <i>kamma</i> (/water reservoir) (that way), when the <i>kamma</i> (/water reservoir) is (thus) piled up, the <i>kamma</i> (/water reservoir) will get high.⁸</p>
<p>အဲသည်လို ယုံယုံ ကြည်ကြည်နှင့် အဟုတ်သူရားကိုလဲ အားကိုးမယ်၊ အဟုတ် တရားကိုလဲ အားကိုးမယ် အဟုတ်သံယာကိုလဲ အားကိုးမယ်ဆိုပါလျှင် ကိုးဆယ်ကြောက်ဖြာ ရောက်စောင့်နာများ ကွယ်တတ်တယ်၊ ဖျောက်တတ်တယ်၊ စည်းစိမ်းစွာလဲ တိုးတက်ပါတယ်။</p>	<p>If you carry out good actions of this sort with a strong conviction in the true <i>Buddha</i>, in the true <i>Dhamma</i> and in the true <i>Sarigha</i>, you may expect the ninety-six kinds of disease to disappear, perish, and to meet with an upturn of fortune.</p>

Clearing Up (Wrong) Perception by Establishing Mindfulness (*Satipaṭṭhāna*)

⁵ The official translation provides us with a rather loose interpretation: "It is the opportune moment when seeker after the Truth can get what they seek, according to their past merit, if they put forth the necessary effort in practicing Vipassanā meditation."

⁶ Here the word "pet" (ပတ်) literally means "splash". People take water in a bowl or a cup and then pour it over a Buddha statue. (In Sri Lanka people offer water in a different way. The Sinhalese people take water in a bowl, carry it around a Bodhi tree while chanting protective chantings, and then pour the water in the soil of the tree.)

⁷ This is a custom that was followed long ago in Myanmar. A pagoda is made of sand at the bank of the Andaman Sea or elsewhere. It is usually celebrated on the full-moon day two months before the Burmese New Year.

⁸ I.e. if one's bad *kamma* is to be repaired, it should be done by a good *kamma*. Also, amassing good *kamma* will create a safer life and existence in the Cycle of Rebirth. In fact, a lot of good *kamma* can also help to provide the doer with comfortable conditions for meditation and Enlightenment. – In this case I have given my own translation. The official translation is very vague and not faithful to the original. It says: "These meritorious deeds will activate the dormant good resultant of past Kamma. They are just like the mending of a broken reservoir." Did Sunlun sayadaw speak about "activating dormant good resultant of past Kamma"? Does the Buddha's teachings contain any instruction how to activate dormant good *kamma*? I am not aware of it. Instead of "activating dormant *kamma*" we are supposed to make new good *kamma* or when we become Arahants to avoid any *kamma* at all. Arahant does not make any new *kamma*. The Noble Persons of lower Enlightenment levels make new *kamma* when their mind is lower than *Sarikkhārupekkhā Nāṇa*. Unenlightened persons pile up *kamma* whenever they have an intention.

(၆၃) သတိပြောနိုင် သညှရွင်သွားပုံ - ကာယာနုပသာနာ သတိပြောနိုင်က သုတေသနသညာကို ရှင်းပေးတယ်။	Mindfulness about the Body (<i>Kāyānupassanā Satipatṭhāna</i>) clears away the (wrong) perception of beatuy.
ဝေဒနုပသာနာ သတိပြောနိုင်က သုခသညာကို ရှင်းပေးတယ်။	Mindfulness about Sensation (<i>Vedanānupassanā Satipatṭhāna</i>) clears away the (wrong) perception of happiness.
နိတ္ထနုပသာနာ သတိပြောနိုင်က နိစွာသညာကို ရှင်းပေးတယ်။	Mindfulness about the Mind (<i>Cittānupassanā Satipatṭhāna</i>) clears away the (wrong) perception of perception.
ဓမ္မနုပသာနာ သတိပြောနိုင်က အတွေသညာကို ရှင်းပေးတယ်။	Mindfulness about Mental Objects (<i>Dhammānupassanā Satipatṭhāna</i>) clears away the (wrong) preception of self.

3. The Mischievous Mediums

In Myanmar there are so many mysteries, that we could wonder whether some of them are fake, or (perhaps more probably) whether some of them are true.

Charlatans, mountebanks, phrenologists, etc. – I suppose there are some in every country. However, there would be none if nobody believed them. Of course, people believe not because it would be fake, but rather because those tricks seem to be true. Then, if there are "true" phenomena, it might be difficult for a power-less human to distinguish right from false, and then to prove the magician wrong.

The Burmese are also people, and there are some who believe, some who don't believe, some who examine, some who doubt, and some who debunk. For example, a monk soon became famous by the mysterious shine he had around his body. Later people found out, that the shine was not "his". It was the light of his cleverly arranged torch, flashlight. The monk disrobed soon after the discovery.

What is however more common are the Burmese mediums. These mediums claim to have relationship with a deity (နတ် [nat]) or more, and that they can answer certain questions or provide protection by help of those deities.⁹ Because those mediums are rarely married, they have been traditionally labelled as "the deity's wife" (နတ်ကတော် [nat-kadō]). Modern Burmese however believe, that these spiritual mediums are not connected to deities, but rather to evil ghosts (nat-soe). It is therefore recommended not to associate them, not to believe them.

The Burmese saying therefore goes:

"နတ်ခိုးတွေကို ဗန်းပြီး လုပ်ကိုင်တားသောက်နေရတဲ့ နတ်ကတော်"

[nat-soe-dweko ban-pyā-bī: lou-kain sā:-tau-netet nat-kadō]

"Having the evil ghosts make requests, the 'deity's wife' works to sustain (herself)."

"Make request" here is expressed literally as "show the tray". This is a metaphore for asking for something. It is originally coming from the way how monkey trainers collect donations from onlookers. Ni Ko has explained:

"ဗန်းပြီးမျောက်ပြု၍ဆန်တောင်းသည်"ဟူသောစကားနှင့်တူသည်။

It is similar to the saying: "Teaching how to pretend ("to show a tray"), (and then) showing a monkey, (the monkey trainer) asks for husked rice".

⁹ The word နတ် [nat] is apparently coming from the Pāli word *nātha*, leader. There are 74 deities in Burmese folklore, 37 of which were approved by the Burmese Buddhist kings in the past, and 37 which were not approved, deemed to be "non-Buddhist". Many of those "non-Buddhist" deities are known with their story from their lay life, as princes, princesses, queens, and other important persons of Burmese history. Some of them died by a horrible death, and some where simply horrible themselves. Of course, the good men and women of the history are usually not included among them. All of the 37 non-Buddhist gods are "based" in Mount Popa of Mandalay Division.

မျာက်သည်ဆန်ကိုမတော်လည်း ဆန်တောင်းနေသောလူသည်

Although monkeys do not eat husked rice, the person who asks for husked rice

မျာက်သည်ဆန်ကို တော်လည်း ဟန်အမူရာပြကာ¹⁰

(teaches) monkeys to pretend as if (they) ate husked rice,

လူတော်မည့်ဆန်အား တောင်းခံခြင်းသည် မျာက်အား ပန်းပြ၍

and having the monkey pretend (it want to eat rice) ("show the tray"), (the monkey) requests and receives husked rice for the man who will eat,

သူတော်မည့်ဆန်အား တောင်းခံခြင်း

(and thus it is) asking and receiving husked rice which he will eat.

The monkey trainer (human) wants to receive rice from the onlookers who watched the performance. However, monkey doesn't eat rice, hence the trainer will teach the monkey to make gestures as if the monkey wanted to eat rice. Then the onlookers will donate rice to the monkey out of compassion for the monkey, however it will be the trainer who will eat it.

In a similar manner the spiritual medium will pretend as if the deities (or spirits) wanted to eat, drink, drink alcohol, smoke, or receive money. The people will then make donations for those "deities", but in fact it is the spiritual medium who will make use of them.

May all beings be happy and healthy ☺

monk Saranya

¹⁰ Ma Kaythi Hlaing further explains: "မျာက်သည်ဆန်ကို မတော်လည်း ဆန်လိုချင်သော လူက မျာက်သည် ဆန်ကို တော်လည်း ဟန်အမူအရာကို ပြစေကာ (ဟန်အမူအရာ ပြခိုင်းကာ)" = Although the monkey doesn't eat the husked rice, the person who wants husked rice will have the monkey pretend that it eats husked rice ((he) will ask (the monkey) to pretend those gestures of pretending).